



Signature in the Schools: The Voices on Blackwell Island

Exercise: A Sound Asylum

Subject(s): Social Studies, English and Theatre

Goals: Students will be able to:

- Develop ideas individually and Employ voice, body, and imagination in role playing.
- Incorporate psychological, historical, and social dynamics derived from information suggested by the script.
- Synthesize evidence from artifacts and primary and secondary sources to obtain information about events in United States history.
- Compare and contrast the use of rhyme, rhythm, sound, imagery, and other literary devices to convey a message and elicit the reader's emotion.

Show Connection:

Inspired by the writings of Nellie Bly, the ten days spent in the madhouse by characters in *The Voices on Blackwell Island* starts with some ambitious goals and some even bigger long term changes to the world of mental health. To better understand why such change was necessary we must dive into what the patients experienced on a day to day basis on the island itself.

Materials:

- *Ten Days in a Mad-House* Sound Paragraphs
- Noisemakers and Found Objects from Classroom

Description:

- As you will see in *The Voices on Blackwell Island*, the playwright takes several historical female figures and combines their stories into one tale of historical fiction, creating a theatrical collage of lives impacted by undeserved hardship and condemnation.
 - » In Nellie Bly's case, her feigned insane journey into Blackwell's Asylum and the subsequent publishing of her series of articles in the New York World on the experience as *Ten Days in a Mad-House* prompted a grand jury to launch its own investigation. The jury's report resulted in an \$850,000 increase in the budget of the Department of Public Charities and Corrections. The grand jury also ensured that future examinations were more thorough such that only the seriously ill were committed to the asylum. The atrocities and horrible conditions and abuses on display that were reported led to

sweeping change at this institution.

- » This exercise will give students the opportunity to interpret and create the environments women in these asylums endured through sound.
 - » Put students into small groups, giving each group a distinct area to work (preferably as far away from other groups as possible.) Provide each group with a selection of noisemakers and any objects that could be used to make interesting noises. Give each group one of the four sound paragraph excerpts from Nellie Bly's "*Ten Days in a Mad-House*"
- Each group of students now has 15 minutes to create an environmental soundscape with a clear beginning, middle and end and present it to us in the dark as the story is read aloud. Students should feel free to use themselves as instruments, found objects from the room, as well as any items provided to them by the instructor. The piece itself should be at least two minutes long and must feature participation by every member of the group. Groups should keep in mind the power of stopping the audible reading of the story excerpt to engage with other sounds and how students can still tell a story with sound, and not need written narrative to keep it going. Please encourage the groups to take this subject matter seriously. This is not an opportunity to belittle or punch down at these very real things that happened to the women of Blackwell Island.
 - Have the groups present one at a time, turning the lights off in your classroom. Encourage the seated audience to close their eyes to remove additional stimuli and to focus just on the story that is being conjured through the words and sounds they hear. As an added challenge to groups, have them present their piece without reading the excerpt and then have them present their piece with the excerpt being read alongside it.

Discussion:

- Did you feel particular soundscapes were grounded in reality or more fanciful than others? What about certain ones made them feel more "real"?
- What were the most frightening or upsetting moments you heard? How would you feel if you were living in an environment filled with these kinds of sounds? How would that affect you?
- How important is verbal communication to you when it comes to understanding a situation or how someone is feeling? Is it necessary? How do you find you communicate with the world around you the best? (Verbally, Physically, Artistically, Written Word?)